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Nietzsche's Earth: Great Events, Great Politics

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Nietzsche's Earth

GREAT EVENTS, GREAT POLITICS

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P R E F A C E

We should listen attentively to Nietzsche's call to be loyal to the earth—Zarathustra's first and signature injunction. This call is best heard and understood together with *Ecce Homo's* bold, hyperbolic claim: "only with me does the earth know great politics." While Nietzsche's earth is certainly a realm of desire, adventure, and passionate individual affirmation, this captures only part of his meaning when he insists that we should care about its direction and future. The challenge is to ask what the human-earth shall become, not only how each of us individually can best live an earthly life. Above all, Nietzsche urges us not to despair of earth's future, as some both in his time and ours do when they celebrate or mourn the "end of history."

Already in Nietzsche's nineteenth century, many in the chattering classes—he calls them the multitude—were fascinated with both optimistic and pessimistic versions of the narrative launched by Hegel, who spoke of his time as the destined culmination of the world, associating it (at least rhetorically) with the Christian end of days. Now we see cruder, fervent, and frequently violent revivals of apocalyptic religious passions. At the same time, the apparent supremacy of the global market appears to some as a reason for either smug self-congratulation or resigned acceptance of an irreversible obstacle to free human development. Still others see environmental crisis as either threatening the human future or provoking the species to reverse course and make a new peace with nature. *Nietzsche's Earth* aims at triangulating the philosopher's thought between nineteenth-century versions of these ideas and attitudes and those proliferating now. Nietzsche, I argue, is one of the very few major philosophers to have taken on characteristic questions posed by

modernity when it first became possible to do so, given the nineteenth-century zenith of the nation-state and the new speeds of industry, transportation, and communication.

There are, notoriously, many Nietzsches. This is not the place to sort, rank, and evaluate them, an enterprise that will no doubt continue as long as scholarship is possible. The Nietzsche encountered here is the one who began to ask what the earth that human beings inhabit, cultivate, and contest might be; this would require freedom from the ideological blinders of the “world-history” that fascinated his contemporaries and still tempts us. When Nietzsche’s madman disrupts the everyday marketplace with his performance art piece on the death of God, he says that we have barely begun to understand this news. This book argues that, for Nietzsche, “world-history” and the states, churches, and other institutions it celebrates, are among the most problematic “shadows of God” (as he called them in *Gay Science*). These shadows claim to found, center, and encompass all significant events and exhaust all meaning. The “new idol” of the state, says Zarathustra (and the same would hold of the world market), proclaims that outside its bounds there is no value.

By giving pride of place to the earth, sometimes called the “human-earth,” Nietzsche shifts focus, paradigm, and perspective away from “so-called world-history.” The world, Nietzsche saw, had been conceived in terms that were ultimately metaphysical and theological, understood as an absolute unity, whether as Hegel’s succession of states constituting “God’s march through the world,” or as a unified, globalized economic marketplace. This last version, anticipating today’s neoliberalism, was that of Eduard von Hartmann, one of the most popular philosophical writers of the late nineteenth century and the target of Nietzsche’s parodic wit. The one thing on which Nietzsche agrees with Hartmann is that it would not be worth living in such a world.

The seeds of *Nietzsche’s Earth* germinated in the recognition that many of the politically oriented topics he discussed are close to those emerging since the sea change marked approximately by the fall of the Berlin wall. Immediately we heard warmed-over versions of the end-of-history story, glorifying either the democratic parliamentary state, the infallible world market, or some hybrid of the two. These were soon followed by generally surprising new movements of peoples, newly intense conflicts fought under religious banners we’d assumed were outdated, and consequent clumsy and destructive reactions by states intent on preserving authority and territory. As some of the Cold War’s fog and smoke cleared, it was replaced on almost every continent by the confusions of new wars, including civil wars and the poorly named, preposterous “global war on terror.” Threatening to overshadow all this was an

immense and pervasive atmospheric disturbance of the earth—global warming or climate change.

Those seeking ways to make sense of these startling and unpredictable events of recent decades might want to see how Nietzsche dealt with related problems in the century before last. We can recontextualize his thought in terms of issues and currents of ideas that bear some resemblance to our own situation. Nietzsche tackled the question of world-history head on: once we explicate its ontological foundations, we can ask whether there really is such a thing. He went on to expose the desperate condition of the state, analyzing such symptoms as “culture wars” and “states of exception” to deal with alleged internal and external threats (both were signature tactics and terms of Bismarck’s *Reich*). Such maneuvers, Nietzsche thought, were reactive and deceptive attempts to cover over what was happening on the human-earth. The earth could no longer be contained within a world of “peoples and fatherlands.” It was witnessing such developments as a movement of peoples that amounted to a new nomadism, and the growth of a transnational audience for news and sensation. Its sense of itself was based on suppressing memories of such things as religious wars that fail to respect national boundaries; its leaders encouraged industrial and bureaucratic standardization that frustrated attempts to live life on a human scale.

World-history involves a philosophy of time, which it sees unfolding toward a goal, punctuated by “great events” involving the rise and fall of states and the careers of world-historical individuals. Nietzsche challenges this theory and experience of time on several fronts. Great events are not noisy but creep in on doves’ feet. Those concerned for the earth’s futurity must be vigilant in watching for the imbalanced times when it may be possible to seize the fleeting moment, the *kairos*, or opportunity, as it rushes by. Excessive detachment and balance, the hypertrophy of the historical sense, mere observation, or surrender to the unfolding “world-process” are recipes of passive nihilism that will blind us to rare opportunities.

Do not read this book expecting that Nietzsche will provide a specific plan or program for earth’s transformation. He would hardly be a thinker of futurity if he did so. The book may disappoint some because it passes lightly over Nietzsche’s varied, often inconsistent speculations about possible political futures. Most of these are as ephemeral and foolish as the notebook jotting where he wishes that Germany would seize Mexico. Perhaps the closest Nietzsche comes to sketching a more specific future for the human-earth is in scattered but incisive thoughts projecting the earth’s transformation into a garden or a “great tree of humanity.” If these hopes remain rather schematic, they still

give us something rich to think with. Contextualized in relation to the almost forgotten intersection of the political and the aesthetic that clustered around the idea of the garden, they can contribute to reconceiving the geoaesthetics of the earth at a time of environmental crisis.

Nietzsche can be read productively as devising a set of concepts for understanding earth and its times, evading the traps set by world-history and its current analogues, traps such as the closure of the future, the fetishism of the state, and the fickle, media-mad taste of the multitude. Crucial to these analyses is the effort to rethink the time—or better, the plural *times*—of the earth. Nietzsche's last substantive book was *The Antichrist*. This deliberately sensational text is more than a mad diatribe. The book attacks the Christian foundations of world-history, its strategies of deferral and mortgaged time; it turns Christianity's own concepts against itself. While calling for a new division and reckoning of chronology, at a more radical level *The Antichrist* is Nietzsche's way of saying that it is later than we think. It is past time for thinking earth's times differently and so opening a space for a great politics of the earth.